The Shadow Side of Leadership

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Whilst much is written and said about the benefits of effective leadership, far less consideration is given to the possible negative impacts of a culture that promotes 'leadership' as the answer.

It is not just where leaders turn 'bad', working for selfish or deluded aims and encouraging followers to work towards goals that are ultimately not in their own interests or those of society, where leadership can have a negative effect. In corporate scandals such as Andy Fastow of Enron and Dennis Kozlowski at Tyco it is clear how personal ambition and greed lead to disastrous consequences for their organisations and similar examples are replete in politics, religion, and all other domains of human activity (Kellerman, 2004). Of equal concern, however, is where more subtle social and psychological factors interact to undermine the very principles that good leadership is meant to address.

In an influential paper Gemmill and Oakley (1992) proposed that leadership could be "an alienating social myth" that, rather than empowering organisations, deskills employees and places excessive dependency on the 'leader'. To make this argument, they draw heavily on psychodynamic literature and propose that through a process of reification, the abstract notion of leadership is taken as representative of an objective reality – in effect, the very existence of notions such as 'leader' and 'leadership' compel us to believe that such things must indeed be real.

Within this framework it is argued "the leadership myth functions as a social defence whose central aim is to repress uncomfortable needs, emotions, and wishes that emerge when people attempt to work together" (ibid, p. 273), the implication being that followers learn to depend on figures in leadership roles to offer them a sense of meaning, direction and purpose.

> "When pain is coupled with an inordinate, widespread, and pervasive sense of helplessness, social myths about the need for great leaders and magical leadership emerge from the primarily unconscious collective feeling that it would take a miracle or messiah to alleviate or ameliorate this painful form of existence" (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992, p.273).

This paper was written largely in response to the recurring emphasis on charismatic and inspirational leadership dominant at the time, and which is still widely pursued within many organisations. The primary concern was that "in over-idealizing the leader, members deskill themselves from their own critical thinking, visions, inspirations, and emotions" (ibid, p. 279). Such a situation, rather than empowering followers to reach their maximum potential, engenders a sense of alienation, helplessness and failure that leads to passivity and a childlike dependence on the leader. The authors conclude by proposing that leadership needs demythologising to enable all individuals, no matter at what level within the organisation, to recognise their internal drivers and abilities and thus find new ways of expressing their creativity and identity when interacting with others.

Conger (1990) expresses similar concerns, but this time from the leader's perspective, arguing that there are three main areas in which leaders can become deluded and lose

touch with reality. The first of these is strategic vision. Whilst it is recognised that a strong vision has been central to the success of many well-known leaders, the strength of this vision and a personal commitment to achieving it can lead to a stubborn refusal to consider alternative and competing approaches. This conviction that the world really is – or should be – configured exactly as we see it is diagnosed by Maccoby (2000) as narcissism, common amongst leaders because it is one of the forces driving them to seek power: that is the power to make their vision come true. Such a situation may mean that the leader fails to detect important changes in context, the necessary resources required to achieve the vision and an exaggeration of the needs of markets and constituents. In effect, the leader may become blind-sighted, seeking out only information that supports his or her vision and ignoring that which conflicts. This situation may be compounded where other people within the organisation fail to challenge the leader's vision, either due to fear of repercussions, or over-dependence and trust in the leader's judgement.

> "Others in the organisation, who tend to become dependent on a visionary leader, may perpetuate the problem through their own actions. They may idealize their leader excessively and thus ignore negative aspects and exaggerate the good qualities. As a result, they may carry out their leader's orders unquestioningly – and leaders may in certain circumstances encourage such behaviour because of their needs to dominate and be admired" (Conger, 1990, p. 291).

A second way in which leaders can lose touch with reality is as a result of their communication and impression-management techniques. It is undoubtedly true that effective communication is a key leadership skill, however it is also one that is open to abuse. In order to make his or her vision more appealing, a leader may be tempted to distort the information that they convey – selectively presenting only those aspects that enhance their message. Whilst this may serve to deceive followers (either intentionally or unintentionally) there is evidence to indicate that it may ultimately begin to delude the presenter as well. This is particularly likely where positive responses are received from the audience, which reinforce and confirm the leader's argument.

The third issue presented by Conger that may undermine a leader's effectiveness are management practices that become liabilities. Whilst unconventional behaviour may commonly be associated with charismatic and visionary leaders, it may well give rise to difficulties in the organisation that are hard to overcome. In particular, problems may arise with managing upward and sideways, relationships with subordinates, a lack of attention to administrative detail and implementation, and failure to plan for succession. Thus, the leader's need for dominance may sour relationships with colleagues and subordinates, limit the development of future leaders, and engender an action-orientated culture that fails to take sufficient account of everyday detail.

These conclusions are supported by more recent studies of executive derailment which demonstrate that excessively high levels of a 'beneficial' competency can lead to failure; thus excessive team orientation can turn to indecisiveness, integrity to zeal and global vision to lack of local focus (McCall, 1998; Dotlich and Cairo, 2003.

Maccoby and Kets de Vries propose that these behaviours frequently arise from deep-seated psychological instabilities - a compulsive or pathological trend within leaders towards narcissism and an organisational tendency towards neurosis. Maccoby (2000) argues that larger-than-life leaders are almost inevitably driven by a need for recognition, power and self-promotion that is key to their success, and occasionally

their downfall. Such leaders tend to express a clear vision and are capable of inspiring followers through their charisma and communication abilities. On the negative side, however, they are often sensitive to criticism, shun emotions, are poor listeners, lack empathy, have a distaste for mentoring and development, and are intensely competitive. Kets de Vries (2004) echoes these thoughts, as well as those of Gemmill and Oakley by stressing that leaders and followers are susceptible to neurosis at both an individual and collective level. The blind desire of followers to be lead can be just as harmful as the blind ambition of the leader.

So what can organisations do to eliminate or minimise these risks? Firstly it is important to be aware that such processes may be occurring – the very fact of making them conscious and explicit can alert people to the fact that something may be astray. The Hogan Development Survey, for example, identifies 11 behavioural tendencies that can lead to executive derailment and can be a very useful development tool. Secondly, checks and controls can be put in place to minimise the potential negative impact of narcissism. Maccoby proposes a number of solutions including finding a trusted sidekick who can challenge the leader's assumptions and encourage them to consider alternatives; indoctrinate the organisation to internalise the vision and values of the leader; and get into psychoanalysis, because through self-awareness and reflection narcissistic leaders will be better placed to exploit the positive aspects of their personality and minimise the negative impacts. Dotlich and Cairo (2003) argue that effective executives regularly commit 10 'unnatural acts' that help mitigate against derailment, including surround yourself with people who create some discomfort, connect instead of create, trust first – ask questions later, give up some control and coach and teach rather than inspire and lead. And thirdly, organisations can reconsider the importance that they place on designated leaders in resolving their challenges. Kets de Vries argues that greater attention needs to be paid to achieving congruence between the personal needs of employees and organisational objectives. This, he proposes, will lead to a greater sense of determination, sense of competence, feeling of community, sense of enjoyment and sense of meaning. Lipman-Blumen (2005) places the onus on followers to confront, reform, undermine, blow the whistle on, or oust a toxic leader before it's too late.

Responsible leadership requires a deep sense of self and community - valuing diversity, ethics, the individual and the collective. It is something that involves all of us – leaders and followers – binding us in a moral relationship that can be quickly undermined through neglect or indifference.

> "Leadership, then, is not just a theoretical arena but one with critical implications for us all and the limits of leadership – what leaders can do and what followers should allow them to do – are foundational aspects of this arena. Leadership, in effect, is too important to be left to leaders." (Grint, 2005)

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